

Disbelieving Joy

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 14, 2024
Text: Luke 24:33-43

Have you ever been so surprised by something, so happy for something totally unexpected that was enveloping you, that you could not quite believe it was happening? It's a pretty unique feeling, especially in our current over-programmed and social media dominant reality where everyone seems to know what everyone is doing, or planning to do, at any given moment. I'm talking about more than just a surprise party of some sort, one you plan or one organized for you. I'm thinking of an experience you might have had which momentarily so overwhelms you with joy that you can't quite believe it's happening. Maybe it's your wedding day, or the birth of your children. Maybe it's a once in a lifetime experience while traveling someplace amazing. Or maybe, it's something that just sneaks up on you with no warning and just blows you away.

As I think about this, one experience comes to mind for me and perhaps if I explain it, you'll get a better sense of what I'm talking about. Of course my wedding day and the birth of my children were incredibly joyful moments as one would expect they would be. But the "disbelieving joy" moment that I experienced and would like to use to illustrate my point this morning happened on my first day of classes my first year at Harvard Divinity School. The entire experience of applying to HDS, and then being accepted, had a dream-like quality to it. Then, when I went up for Admitted Students Day, I could scarcely believe it was real. Sitting in on classes, meeting with other admitted students, welcome lectures from some of the most amazing faculty in the world – it was literally surreal from start to finish, especially to a 50-something woman in a sea of very young faces. But that's not the

day I'm talking about. I'm talking about my very first day of classes, the very first day when I moved from the surreal to the real, when I went from hopeful applicant to serious scholar – literally a dream come true for me.

I took the commuter rail train from Providence to South Station and then the Red Line subway from South Station to the Harvard Square exit. I literally felt like I was traveling away from everything my life had been in that moment to a whole new reality I was actually having difficulty envisioning. As the subway made its way into the Harvard Square station, that new reality began to take shape. The train entered the station by way of a long curved tunnel deep underground. As the driver applied the brakes heading into that long slow curve, they began to squeal and I was instantly transported back to the “little train” which was my favorite ride on a long closed lakeside amusement park close to our summer house when I was a child. I loved that little train, but I hadn't thought about it in decades until that moment when the brakes on the subway train began to sing. Then I was instantly back in the “little train,” revealing as it made the turn, a diorama of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, complete with all their sparkling treasure. As I sat on the subway train deep in the bowels of Cambridge, MA I could suddenly see that diorama in minute detail. I could feel my father sitting next to me, his arm tightening around my shoulder as we entered the cave-like tunnel. I was absolutely back there, washed away on a tidal wave of joy.

The vision quickly evaporated as the subway slowly rolled into the massive Harvard Square Station, but I could still feel my dad's arm around me. I knew that Dad was with me as I began this new chapter of my life, so proud of me that he wanted to burst. The overwhelming joy which washed over me in that brief instant took my breath away. I knew then that whatever happened to me as those

Harvard days began, everything was going to be okay. I knew beyond doubt that I was where I was supposed to be, doing what I was supposed to be doing. It was such a strong, vivid feeling that it was almost unbelievable. All these emotions of joy and memory and love and hope all mish-mashed up into an overwhelming experience of happiness rolled over me carrying me along on the crest of the wave. It was a feeling I had never experienced before nor since. As I think about it in the context of today's text from Luke, I understand it now as a moment of disbelieving joy that changed my life forever.

This is why when I read today's text from Luke describing the experience of the resurrected Jesus' appearance to the eleven in the upper room, I think I have some small sense of what they experienced as the impossible confronted them head on. My personal experience of one fleeting moment in my life opened up that scripture passage to me in a whole new way. This, dear ones, is the way we should be reading the bible every time we pick it up because whenever we read the bible, we are bringing our whole selves into that sacred moment. At least we should be. Unfortunately, too often when we read a story from the bible, we approach it like we did the stories in the anthology books we read in our high school or college literature classes. Or the recounting of historical events in our history text books. Most of those times, as brilliantly written as those stories might have been, as important to history as those moments captured on the page were, they remained for most of us just black ink on white paper attempting to convey some information that we may or may not have been interested in at the time. Dear ones, this is no way to read the scriptures, even though it's the way most of us were taught to read the scriptures. If we would like to encounter the scriptures as more than sentences written by some long ago person we can scarcely envision more than a millennia ago, then we have to figure how it is we might

bring our full selves into that task. We have to be able to see ourselves in the text. We have to recognize that, as Thich Nhat Hahn taught, “the way we perceive the world around us depends entirely on our way of looking at it.”¹ In other words, our life experience always accompanies us as we seek to encounter scripture. Our task then is to recognize this and receive it as the gift from God that it is.

Now, I could go off on an entire tangent here about the different approaches to bible study and I am actually thinking about a summer sermon/study series which would do exactly that. But, for today, what I want us to be thinking about is how our personal experiences can provide us with much needed insight, even empathy for, the disciples as they encountered the Risen Christ in their midst so unexpectedly. What does it feel like to be so totally gob-smacked as they were in this moment when they were mourning the death of their beloved Jesus and then – BAM – there he was. Also, we need to set aside all the other feelings which are triggered by this same story – those feelings of how badly it hurt when our own loved one died, when we longed for just one more minute to tell them we loved them, to say goodbye, to have a hug. Those moments in our lives are part of our encounter with this text as well. This is what enables us to empathize with all the disciples were feeling when Jesus literally popped back into their lives with no warning. Of course they were overwhelmed with joy, and more than a little fear. And of course, they didn’t quite believe it. But they chose to feel joy anyway. Just like we would if the same thing happened to us and a loved one recently lost was suddenly back again.

Most interesting in this story to me is how Jesus reacts to their reaction to him. After greeting them with his standard, “Peace be with you,” he immediately noted that they were startled and terrified. He knew they were assuming he was a ghost, and not himself living once

¹ Thich Nhat Hahn, *How to See*, © 2019 Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, Inc., p. 84.

more. “Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself,” he says, trying to ease their confusion. Important for us to remember at this point as that belief in ghosts was quite common in Jesus’ time so it is a perfectly logical conclusion for the disciples to come to in this situation. This is why Jesus’ task in the moment was to convince them he wasn’t a ghost. He was himself, restored to life. How does he do that? He asks for something to eat because ghosts don’t eat. He also invites them to touch him because you can’t touch ghosts either. Then comes my favorite line in this whole story, “while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.” This, dear ones, is the entire point of this story. This is what it offers to us. The disciples – those people who had spent the last three years of their lives working and traveling and living with Jesus – were still disbelieving and wondering about this miracle standing right in front of them and they chose joy anyway. They chose to trust in Jesus however he was as he was with them now. They knew he was radically different, and yet the same. They knew he had been dead and buried, and yet there he was with them. They knew he had not been there with them and then, suddenly, he was. They knew all this. They experienced all this, and yet still they were wondering and disbelieving. How much more of a challenge is it then for us, who never knew Jesus when he walked this earth, to accept this incredible miracle, and mystery, of the Resurrected Jesus?

Dear friends, on the surface, this story is just crazy. It pulls at our heart strings with its promise of a loved one dead who is suddenly no longer dead. We all know what it is to long for that experience. And here it is. But why? What is the purpose of all this anyway? Yes, we sing it in all the great hymns of Easter – that Jesus has defeated death, that he has won the victory over the grave. That the love of God

conquers all, even death. Yes, we know that part of the story. But it still sounds crazy. But here's the thing. Maybe crazy is an inherent part of the story and has been all along. Think about what Jesus came to do – to confront the legalistic structures of the Judaism of his lifetime so that the people could understand God as loving and invested in their wellbeing rather than just a judgmental being always kept at a distance, appeased with sacrifice and ritual. And let's not forget this religious authority system had the full backing of Rome as long as they kept the locals under control. Yet, here comes Jesus, intent on upsetting the status quo because the status quo had totally lost sight of God. Jesus' mission and ministry made no sense to the dominant society in which he lived and taught as a rabbi. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that the religious authorities did think he was a nutjob, like so many other so-called messiahs which had come before him and fizzled away into nothing. But this Jesus was different. He wasn't going anywhere. In fact, just the opposite was happening. Crowds followed him, seeking to know more about this new way of understanding God, a God who saw them as having individual worth, who loved them and wanted the best for them. This Jesus offered forgiveness of sins without any strings. Clearly, this Jesus guy, he was crazy and he was dangerous. He had to go. Except, even that solution ultimately didn't work. He was back again. Coming upon two followers on the road to Emmaus. Popping up in a room full of sad and frightened disciples. Why did this happen? Why does the resurrection matter? Because it was what enabled the disciples to understand that somehow, somehow, Jesus was not really dead. He was not forever gone. He had been transformed, but he was still here somehow. All he taught, all he did, it was still valid. What they had given their lives to for three years still mattered. The work

they had begun could go on. Jesus would help them make sure that happened. And, dear ones, we are living proof that it did.

So, my friends, as you leave this sacred space and head back out into lives that are too often frantic and lacking in joy, dare to set aside your disbelief, your fears, your doubts and just accept the miracle and the love of the Risen Christ. Dare to lean into your disbelieving joy and allow it to transform you as it transformed the disciples, and even Jesus himself. Dare to believe to the core of who you are that with God all things are indeed possible. Who knows what might just happen then? Amen.